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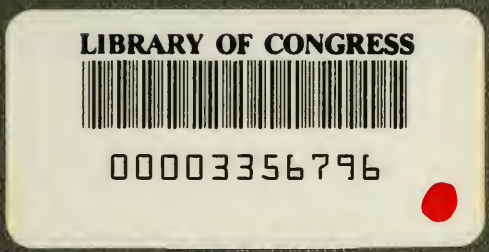

Old South Leaflets.

Washington's Birthday, 1885.

The Character of Washington.

From the Oration of Hon. Robert C. Winthrop at the laying of the corner-stone of the National Monument to Washington, July 4, 1848.

In the whole history of the world it may be doubted whether any man can be found, who has exerted a more controlling influence over men and over events than George Washington. To what did he owe that influence? How did he win, how did he wield, that magic power, that majestic authority, over the minds and hearts of his countrymen and of mankind? In what did the power of Washington consist?

It was not the power of vast learning or varied acquirements. He made no pretensions to scholarship, and had no opportunity for extensive reading.

It was not the power of sparkling wit or glowing rhetoric. Though long associated with deliberative bodies, he never made a set speech in his life, nor ever mingled in a stormy debate.

It was not the power of personal fascination. There was little about him of that gracious affability which sometimes lends such resistless attraction to men of commanding position. His august presence inspired more of awe than of affection, and his friends, numerous and devoted as they were, were bound to him rather by ties of respect than of love.

It was not the power of a daring and desperate spirit of heroic adventure. "If I ever said so," replied Washington, when asked whether he had said that there was something charming in the sound of a whistling bullet; "if I ever said so, it was when I was young." He had no passion for mere exploits. He sought no bubble reputation in the cannon's mouth. With a courage never questioned, and equal to every exigency, he had yet "a wisdom which did guide his valor to act in safety."

In what, then, did the power of Washington consist? When Pat-

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rick Henry returned home from the first Continental Congress, and was asked who was the greatest man in that body, he replied: "If you speak of eloquence, Mr. Rutledge, of South Carolina, is the greatest orator; but if you speak of solid information and sound judgment, Colonel Washington is by far the greatest man on that floor."

When, fifteen years earlier, Washington, at the close of the French War, took his seat for the first time in the House of Burgesses of Virginia, and a vote of thanks was presented to him for his military services to the Colony, his hesitation and embarrassment were relieved by the speaker, who said, "Sit down, Mr. Washington, your modesty equals your valor; and that surpasses the power of any language that I possess."

But it was not solid information, or sound judgment, or even that rare combination of surpassing modesty and valor, great as these qualities are, which gave Washington such a hold on the regard, respect, and confidence of the American people. I hazard nothing in saying that it was the high moral element of his character which imparted to it its preponderating force. His incorruptible honesty, his uncompromising truth, his devout reliance on God, the purity of his life, the scrupulousness of his conscience, the disinterestedness of his purposes, his humanity, generosity, and justice — these were the ingredients which, blending harmoniously with solid information and sound judgment and a valor only equalled by his modesty, made up a character to which the world may be fearlessly challenged for a parallel.

"Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire, *conscience*," was one of a series of maxims which Washington framed or copied for his own use when a boy. His rigid adherence to principle, his steadfast discharge of duty, his utter abandonment of self, his unreserved devotion to whatever interests were committed to his care, attest the more than vestal vigilance with which he observed that maxim. He kept alive that spark. He made it shine before men. He kindled it into a flame which illumined his whole life. No occasion was so momentous, no circumstances were so minute, as to absolve him from following its guiding ray. The marginal explanation in his account book, in regard to the expenses of his wife's annual visit to the camp during the Revolutionary War, with his passing allusion to the "self-denial" which the exigencies of his country had

cost him, furnishes a charming illustration of his habitual exactness. The fact that every barrel of flour which bore the brand of "George Washington, Mount Vernon," was exempted from the customary inspection in the West India ports — that name being regarded as an ample guaranty of the quality and quantity of any article to which it was affixed — supplies a not less striking proof that his exactness was everywhere understood.

Everybody saw that Washington sought nothing for himself. Everybody knew that he sacrificed nothing to personal or to party ends. Hence, the mighty influence, the matchless sway, which he exercised over all around him. "He was the only man in the United States who possessed the confidence of all (said Thomas Jefferson) there was no other one who was considered as anything more than a party leader."

Who ever thinks of Washington as a mere politician? Who ever associates him with the petty arts and pitiful intrigues of partisan office-seekers or partisan office-holders? Who ever pictures him canvassing for votes, dealing out proscription, or doling out patronage?

"No part of my duty," wrote Washington to Governor Bowdoin, in a letter, the still unpublished original of which is a precious inheritance of my own: "No part of my duty will be more delicate, and in many instances more unpleasant, than that of nominating and appointing persons to office. It will undoubtedly happen that there will be several candidates for the same office, whose pretensions, abilities, and integrity may be nearly equal, and who will come forward so equally supported in every respect as almost to require the aid of supernatural intuition to fix upon the right. I shall, however, in all events, have the satisfaction to reflect that I entered upon my administration unconfined by a single engagement, uninfluenced by any ties of blood or friendship, and with the best intention and fullest determination to nominate to office those persons only who, upon every consideration, were the most deserving, and who would probably execute their several functions to the interest and credit of the American Union; if such characters could be found by my exploring every avenue of information respecting their merits and pretensions that it was in my power to obtain."

And there was as little of the vulgar hero about him, as there was of the mere politician. At the head of a victorious army, of which he

was the idol — an army too often provoked to the very verge of mutiny by the neglect of an inefficient Government — we find him the constant counsellor of subordination and submission to the civil authority. With the sword of a conqueror at his side, we find him the unceasing advocate of peace. Repeatedly invested with more than the power of a Roman Dictator, we see him receiving that power with reluctance, employing it with the utmost moderation, and eagerly embracing the earliest opportunity to resign it. The offer of a crown could not, did not, tempt him for an instant from his allegiance to liberty. He rejected it with indignation and abhorrence, and proceeded to devote all his energies and all his influence, all his popularity and all his ability, to the establishment of that Republican System, of which he was from first to last the uncompromising advocate, and with the ultimate success of which he believed the best interests of America and of the world were inseparably connected.

It is thus that, in contemplating the character of Washington, the offices which he held, the acts which he performed, his successes as a statesman, his triumphs as a soldier, almost fade from our sight. It is not the Washington of the Delaware or the Brandywine, of Germantown or of Monmouth; it is not Washington, the President of the Convention, or the President of the Republic, which we admire. We cast our eyes over his life, not to be dazzled by the meteoric luster of particular passages, but to behold its whole pathway radiant, radiant everywhere, with the true glory of a just, conscientious, consummate man! Of him we feel it to be no exaggeration to say that

"All the ends he aimed at
Were his Country's, his God's, and Truth's."

Of him we feel it to be no exaggeration to say that he stands upon the page of history the great modern illustration and example of that exquisite and Divine precept, which fell from the lips of the dying monarch of Israel:

"He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God;

"And he shall be as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds!"

And now, fellow-citizens, it is this incomparable and transcendent character, which America, on this occasion, holds up afresh to the admiration of mankind. Believing it to be the only character which

could have carried us safely through our own Revolutionary struggles, we present it, especially, this day, to the wistful gaze of convulsed and distracted Europe.

Let us rejoice that our call is anticipated. Washington is no new name to Europe. His star has been seen in every sky, and wise men everywhere have done it homage. To what other merely human being, indeed, has such homage ever before or since been rendered?

"I have a large acquaintance among the most valuable and exalted classes of men," wrote Erskine to Washington himself, "but you are the only being for whom I ever felt an awful reverence."

"Illustrious man!" said Fox of him, in the British House of Commons in 1794, "deriving honor less from the splendor of his situation than from the dignity of his mind; before whom all borrowed greatness sinks into insignificance, and all the potentates of Europe become little and contemptible."

"Washington is dead!" proclaimed Napoleon, on hearing of the event. "This great man fought against tyranny; he established the liberty of his country. His memory will be always dear to the French people, as it will be to all free men of the two worlds."

"It will be the duty of the historian and the sage in all ages," says Lord Brougham, "to let no occasion pass of commemorating this illustrious man; and, until time shall be no more, will a test of the progress which our race has made in wisdom and virtue be derived from the veneration paid to the immortal name of Washington."

"One thing is certain," says Guizot — "one thing is certain: that which Washington did — the founding of a free government by order and peace, at the close of the revolution — no other policy than his could have accomplished."

And later, better still: "Efface henceforth the name of Machiavel," said Lamartine, within a few weeks past, in his reply to the Italian association — "efface henceforth the name of Machiavel from your titles of glory, and substitute for it the name of Washington; that is the one which should now be proclaimed; that is the name of modern liberty. It is no longer the name of a politician or a conqueror that is required; it is that of a man, the most disinterested, the most devoted to the people. This is the man required by liberty. The want of the age is a European Washington!"

But, fellow-citizens, while we thus commend the character and

example of Washington to others, let us not forget to imitate it ourselves; and let us not cease to remember and cherish the great leading principles of his policy.

Above all, and before all, in the heart of Washington, was the Union of the States; and no opportunity was ever omitted by him, to impress upon his fellow-citizens the profound sense which he entertained, of its vital importance at once to their prosperity and their liberty.

In that incomparable Address in which he bade farewell to his countrymen at the close of his Presidential service, he touched upon many other topics with the earnestness of a sincere conviction. He called upon them in solemn terms to "cherish public credit;" to "observe good faith and justice towards all nations," avoiding both "inveterate antipathies, and passionate attachments" towards any; to mitigate and assuage the unquenchable fire of party spirit, "lest, instead of warming, it should consume;" to abstain from "characterizing parties by geographical distinctions;" "to promote institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge;" to respect and uphold "religion and morality, those great pillars of human happiness, those firmest props of the duties of men and of citizens."

But what can exceed, what can equal, the accumulated intensity of thought and of expression with which he calls upon them to cling to the Union of the States. "It is of infinite moment," says he, in language which we ought never to be weary of hearing or of repeating, "that you should properly estimate the immense value of your National Union to your collective and individual happiness; that you should cherish a cordial, habitual, immovable attachment to it; accustoming yourselves to think and speak of it as of the palladium of your political safety and prosperity; watching for its preservation with jealous anxiety; discountenancing whatever may suggest even a suspicion that it can, *in any event*, be abandoned; and indignantly frowning upon the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts."

The Union, *the Union in any event*, was thus the sentiment of Washington. The Union, *the Union in any event*, let it be our sentiment this day!

Yes, today, fellow-citizens, let us seize this occasion to renew to

each other our vows of allegiance and devotion to the American Union, and let us recognize in our common title to the name and the fame of Washington, and in our common veneration for his example and his advice, the all-sufficient centripetal power, which shall hold the thick clustering stars of our confederacy in one glorious constellation forever! Let the column which we are about to construct, be at once a pledge and an emblem of perpetual union! Let the foundations be laid, let the superstructure be built up and cemented, let each stone be raised and riveted, in a spirit of national brotherhood! And may the earliest ray of the rising sun — till that sun shall set to rise no more — draw forth from it daily, as from the fabled statue of antiquity, a strain of national harmony, which shall strike a responsive chord in every heart throughout the Republic!

Proceed, then, fellow-citizens, with the work for which you have assembled! Lay the corner-stone of a monument which shall adequately bespeak the gratitude of the whole American people to the illustrious Father of his country! Build it to the skies; you cannot outreach the loftiness of his principles! Found it upon the massive and eternal rock; you cannot make it more enduring than his fame! Construct it of the peerless Parian marble; you cannot make it purer than his life! Exhaust upon it the rules and principles of ancient and of modern art; you cannot make it more proportionate than his character!

But let not your homage to his memory end here. Think not to transfer to a tablet or a column, the tribute which is due from yourselves. Just honor to Washington can only be rendered by observing his precepts and imitating his example. *Similitudine decoremus.* He has built his own monument. We, and those who come after us in successive generations, are its appointed, its privileged guardians. This wide-spread Republic is the true monument to Washington. Maintain its Independence. Uphold its Constitution. Preserve its Union. Defend its Liberty. Let it stand before the world in all its original strength and beauty, securing peace, order, equality, and freedom to all within its boundaries, and shedding light, and hope, and joy, upon the pathway of human liberty throughout the world; and Washington needs no other monument. Other structures may fitly testify our veneration for him; this, this alone, can adequately illustrate his services to mankind.

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